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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000362

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, INR/EAP, OES

BANGKOK FOR REO OFFICE

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TREASURY FOR OASIA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2019

TAGS: [ECON](#) [SENV](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA TIMBER INDUSTRY THREATENS ELEPHANT
POPULATION

REF: RANGOON 357

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Classified By: Economic Officer Samantha A. Carl-Yoder for Reasons 1.4
(b and d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Burma's wild elephant population continues to dwindle. Environmentalists estimate fewer than 4,000 roam wild, compared to 5,500 in 1996. Although elephants are revered by the Burmese people, wild populations are threatened by habitat destruction, declining breeding rates, and poaching. Elephants are utilized by the timber industry, and environmentalists complain that abuse and overwork causes a high number of animal deaths. In order to meet the regime's increasing demand for foreign currency from timber sales, state-owned Myanmar Timber Enterprise and private companies continue to capture and use wild elephants for felling, further threatening the limited population. End Summary.

Burma's Wild Elephants

¶2. (SBU) Environmentalists estimate between 25,000-35,000 wild Asian elephants live in 13 countries. India has an estimated 20,000 elephants; Burma has the second largest population, with approximately 4,000 wild elephants, according to U Uga, Director of Burmese NGO Biodiversity and

Nature Conservation Association (BANCA). Although these figures indicate a vibrant population, the number of wild elephants in Burma has decreased 27 percent since 1996, when Ministry of Forestry surveys showed more than 5,500 lived in Burma.

¶3. (SBU) U Uga explained there are numerous threats to Burma's wild elephant population. Timber is one of Burma's top exports, and the rate of deforestation has increased substantially during the past 20 years. The felling of trees destroys wild elephant habitats, as well as sources of food, he noted. Additionally, Burma's elephant population is becoming increasingly fragmented due to both loss of habitat and increasing capture of wild elephants for use in the timber industry. Elephants living in small groups have a lower survival rate, as the likelihood of breeding declines, U Uga explained. Finally, larger male elephants are under threat of poaching for their ivory tusks. While he could not provide any specific figures on animal poaching, U Uga stated that large pieces of ivory are often shipped to China and Thailand through illegal border trade and can be found in the markets in the Burmese city of Muse (along the China border).

Use in Timber Industry

¶4. (C) U Uga noted that as the wild elephant population dwindles, the number of elephants living in captivity is increasing, due to both the capture and domestication of wild elephants and births in captivity. According to BANCA data, there are more than 4,500 elephants in captivity in Burma, up

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from 2,000 in 2000. The majority of these elephants are used by Burma's timber industry to move felled logs, although approximately 30 elephants live in zoos in Rangoon and Nay Pyi Taw. According to U Khin Zaw, former Deputy General Manager of Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE), the state-owned company responsible for timber extraction, MTE owns approximately 2,500 elephants, the majority of which were captured in the wild. He explained that in order to meet the regime's increasing demand for hard currency from the sale of timber, MTE must capture and use additional wild elephants to fell more trees.

¶5. (C) U Khin Zaw noted that the 2,000 captive elephants not possessed by MTE are privately-owned and are often rented to MTE and private companies for use in the timber industry. U Uga confirmed that regime crony Tay Za, who owns more than 500 elephants, leases them to crony companies including Dagon Timber and IGE Ltd. Co, as well as Regional Commanders in Mandalay and Myitkyina (Reftel) during the timber harvest.

No Animal Welfare Protections

¶6. (C) U Uga explained that the use of elephants to move felled trees is more environmentally friendly than using heavy machinery, but he has observed that MTE, private companies, and the military overwork the animals. He complained that animal mistreatment and overuse have led to an increasing number of elephant deaths. Additionally, U Uga estimates that an average of 10 elephants die each year during capture, further depleting the wild elephant population.

¶7. (C) Burmese law prohibits the capture of elephants except for research purposes; however, U Khin Zaw says the regime turns a blind eye with regard to elephants and the timber trade. U Uga lamented that the Ministry of Forestry does not limit how many elephants are captured annually. He surmised that, without sustainable practices to protect the existing population, the number of wild elephants will continue to decrease.

DINGER